

# TÜRKIYE AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION: IMPACT AND SUSTAINABILITY

*First Monitoring: September 2023-January 2024*

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*The opinions expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.*

# **Türkiye and regional normalization: impact and sustainability**

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*After a long period of muscular approaches in the region, since 2021 Türkiye has entered a new phase of normalization in the relations with some historical competitors. From the Mediterranean to the Middle East, Gulf and Caucasus, Ankara today aims at establishing itself as a 'stabilizing' power, constantly aims to balance its strategic assets towards the different areas in order to avoid regional isolation and implementing 'win-win' diplomatic approaches in every direction. The strategic objective is to reduce the degree of regional uncertainty, as well as to position itself as a key interlocutor at a bilateral, regional, and global level. However, this ambition has to cope with changing regional dynamics, as the current Israel-Palestine war shows.*

*Therefore, in the framework of the project 'TURKEY AND REGIONAL NORMALIZATION PROCESSES: WHAT IMPACT ON THE INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF ITALY AND EUROPE?' – supported by the Analysis, Programming Statistical and Historic Documentation Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – CeSPI Observatory on Türkiye and its partner institution Kalyoncu Middle East Research Center (KALMEC) monitored the main developments in Türkiye's relations with the Mediterranean, Middle East, Gulf, and Caucasus region taking place between September 2023 to January 2024, by paying attention to the main key players with whom normalization has already started. In addition to the analysis of main events, the objective was also to highlight the sustainability of the normalization processes and related critical issues, not only at a bilateral but also at a regional level. In this regard, CeSPI team has coordinated the tasks and worked mainly on the Mediterranean and Gulf regions, while the Middle East and Caucasus have been under Kalmec's competency.*

## TABLE OF CONTENT

1. The Century of Türkiye, between vision, ambitions and reality .....	5
1.1 Domestic developments .....	6
1.2 The wider regional context.....	7
2. Mediterranean Region .....	9
2.1 Greece – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	9
2.1.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications.....	10
2.2 Egypt –Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	13
2.2.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications.....	14
2.3 Libya-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	16
2.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications .....	17
3. The Middle East.....	19
3.1. Syria-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	19
3.1.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond .....	21
3.2. Israel/Palestine - Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	22
3.2.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond .....	24
4. Gulf Region .....	26
4.1 UAE – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	26
4.2. Saudi Arabia – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments.....	27
4.3. Qatar – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments.....	27
4.3.1. Sustainability of the normalisation process and its implications.....	28
5. Caucasus .....	32
5.1 Armenia- Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments .....	32
5.1.2 Sustainability of the normalisation process and its implications.....	32
5.2. Georgia – Türkiye, Meaningful bilateral developments .....	33
5.3. Azerbaijan-Türkiye, Meaningful bilateral developments .....	35

## 1. The Century of Türkiye, between vision, ambitions and reality

On the 100th anniversary of foundation of the Republic of Türkiye's (1923), under the slogan '*Türkiye Yüzyılı*' Erdoğan and his government formalized a new approach in regional affairs, aiming to some extents to seal the processes of dialogue and normalization already initiated some years ago. The goal is to present Ankara as a regional balancing actor, attempting to mediate tensions and diminishing the margin of uncertainty in the regional chessboard characterized by instability. The new and strengthened engagement with the Gulf countries, also to be understood as a reflection of the normalization that took place between them in 2021; the growing Iranian influence and the American approach in the region, have been pushing factors for Türkiye's rising role. In addition, economy, and energy element, as well as factors related to domestic security and ideological aspects, have to be considered. Indeed, according to Turkish policymakers, '*As Türkiye is located in a very challenging region, it has been pursuing and defending its legitimate interests by responding to its geographical necessity, while it is also embedded in the international architecture (NATO; UN; EU candidacy, etc) and enjoys positive relations with Africa, Russia, China*'<sup>1</sup>. Hence, Türkiye aims at balancing the strategic assets coming from each area, by avoiding the self-isolation, as it happened in the past, and by implementing constructive diplomatic efforts in any direction. Hence, also the great investments in the defense industry contributed to arise Türkiye as hard power which, combined with the capillary soft power tools, makes Türkiye as '*A well-functioning smart power able to act as a hub of peace in the region and for the world*'<sup>2</sup>.

As a matter of facts, the significance of Türkiye as a key-actor in the region, politically, military and economically, increased in the light of Russia-Ukraine war and nowadays Ankara's goal is to capitalize out of its mediation efforts. Since Turkish diplomacy entered a new and delicate stage of normalization and stabilization with historical competitors by enhancing the role of Muslim democracy in the region, must cope with new regional developments as well as with the perception of the international community, mainly the West, on its foreign policy approach and vision. Indeed, this is related not just to ideology or vision, but also to pragmatic, response-oriented, and nation-interest-based considerations. Thus, the domestic political and social dynamics, economy, and security issues are important driving factors. Although the country is experiencing a time of great financial hardship given the high, and not always sustainable, inflation rate, combined with the devaluation of the local currency (TL) against the Dollar and

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Sabah, '*Century of Türkiye,*' revolution to bring peace to world: Erdoğan, October 2022. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/elections/century-of-turkiye-revolution-to-bring-peace-to-world-erdogan>

Daily Sabah, '*Türkiye finds its own axis in the world: Presidential spokesperson*', April 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-finds-its-own-axis-in-the-world-presidential-spokesperson>

<sup>2</sup> Daily Sabah, '*Turkish FM signals transformative foreign policy in 'Century of Türkiye'*', October 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-fm-signals-transformative-foreign-policy-in-century-of-turkiye>

M.Ataman, '*The Century of Türkiye. A New Foreign Policy Vision to build a Turkish axis*', Insight Turkey, Summer 2023, vol. 25, n.3 ,pp.73-96

Euro, with direct effects on the purchasing power of citizens, macroeconomic data show great resilience in terms of growth and industrial productivity. This is a point Erdoğan cherishes, showing Türkiye's ability to penetrate the region in terms of exports. 'Our goal is not to leave any country where Turkish products are unrecognized and our exporters have not set foot', he affirms. While the economy expanded by a more-than-expected 5.9% year-over-year in the third quarter, accelerating from an upwardly revised 3.9% growth in the second quarter and 4% in the first quarter of 2023, according to government data, average monthly exports have reached \$21.3 billion, compared to just \$3 billion back in 2002. This was considered as a positive record by the government.<sup>3</sup>

However, economy has been a main issue in the last political and presidential elections affected also by the challenges posed by the united opposition front aimed at opposing Erdoğan; the traditional internal fault lines exacerbated by the most recent devastation of February 6, 2023, earthquakes. Though they were hard-fought, Erdoğan and his government marked a new triumph leading the way to the 'Century of Türkiye', intended to formalize a new course in domestic and foreign affairs by perpetuating the national power and its autonomy. Hence, the return to an orthodox economic approach, thanks to the appointment of the new team headed by Minister Mehmet Şimşek and Hafize Gaye Erkan as Governor of the Central Bank. Moreover, the arrival of Hakan Fidan, before head of Turkish intelligence, at the heights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, set the new political course, strengthening the image of a strong Türkiye and of the 'Axis of Türkiye'.

## 1.1 Domestic developments

On the other hand, while the opposition parties have effectively put an end to the Nation Alliance designed to counter Erdoğan's power, in November 2023 the largest party CHP has unset its long-standing leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, by appointing as party's General Secretary, Özgür Özel, politician and pharmacist. Currently, there is a broad underway debate on the possible alliance of the major opposition, namely İYİ and CHP parties, which appears, at least on the media scene, increasingly divided both internally and regarding the eventuality of conducting a united electoral campaign. However, although traditional social polarization persists, Erdoğan's AK Party axis with the nationalist MHP continues, while there are some intestine rumors opening up to a flirt with some conservative groups who in the last elections joined the opposition. Nevertheless, Erdoğan confirmed to be a leader with undisputed power who brought back the Turkish identity at the center of the domestic and regional scene. His goal is now to further increase his power in the upcoming local elections set for March 31, with the aim of winning back Istanbul by ousting the current CHP mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu. Recently, during a public ceremony, the names of the main AKP candidates were revealed and Murat Kurum, former Minister of the Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change (2018-2023) and before manager of TOKİ (Mass Housing Development Administration), was confirmed as reference man for Istanbul, focusing heavily on the need of an effective anti-seismic plan, given the city's natural propensity to earthquakes. Along AKP and MHP unveiling candidates, the new electoral campaign in Türkiye has *de facto* begun.

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<sup>3</sup> Daily Sabah, *Türkiye's exports soar to record \$255.8 billion in 2023: Erdoğan*, January 2024. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkiyes-exports-soar-to-record-2558billion-in-2023-erdogan>

Before its launch, the domestic discourse has been centered on *Türkiye Yüz Yılı* (Türkiye Century) and its several celebrations culminated with the final rally of October 29, attended by many international and diplomatic guests. Erdoğan's mood, however, was visibly affected by the developments in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, since the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Palestine, much attention has been focused on the Palestinian cause and related humanitarian situation. Although the President waited days before expressing himself personally on the situation, after the withdrawal of Israeli diplomatic personnel from Türkiye under 'security concerns', he did not spare harsh accusations and words, reiterating his role as supporter of the oppressed Palestinians, by not departing from his traditional rhetoric also regarding Hamas. Contacts with the political wing of Hamas, considered by Türkiye as a civil resistance movement and not a terrorist organization, have always been assiduous in the search for a sustainable solution that would lead to the release of the hostages and the end of hostility. The ultimate goal, according to Ankara, would be the creation of two states according to the 1967 borders. In this regard, Turkish public diplomacy and state media have become the main channels denouncing Israeli humanitarian crimes and the ineffectiveness of the international community in halting the violence. Several peaceful rallies and protests have taken place in Istanbul and in the main Turkish cities under the slogan #stopgenocide while mass campaigns have been organized to boycott the sale of Israeli products. As well, the Israeli-Palestine conflict has created some spill over on Turkish domestic environment leading to some stability and security concerns. In recent months, security measures have been increased by the Ministry of the Interior who, through intelligence, would have thwarted infiltration attempts by the Mossad, leading to the arrest of a large number of people. As the fight against the foreign interference in the internal affairs of Türkiye are sensitive issues in the social psychology of the Country, therefore also used instrumentally in the political rhetoric, the anti-terrorism measures have been tightened by a presidential decree following the meeting of the security council. This move has to be intended also in response to the exacerbation of violence on the Syrian border and in Iraq, which led to new casualties among Turkish soldiers stationed across the border.

## **1.2 The wider regional context**

At the same time, faced with the umpteenth failure of the relations with Israel, recently fully normalized and sealed after February 2023 earthquakes, Turkish diplomacy has intensified communications and dialogue with all regional and international actors, calling for an end to hostilities. In front of violence escalation in the region, intense diplomatic traffic has been taking place in Ankara. Aware that in a highly fragmented and divided context, the goal is to maximize the cooperative spirit and to narrow the margins of friction. In this perspective, at the beginning of December an important result was signed in Athens along the meeting between Erdoğan and his delegation with the counterparts. The appeasement with Greece, a fundamental interlocutor on many dossiers of political, economy and energy importance, from Europe to the wider Mediterranean and beyond, is today again on the table of decision makers, revitalized also in its objectives. This is also the result of the achieved normalization with Egypt, in light of the challenges involving both Türkiye and Europe, despite in the background persists the pending issue of the division of the island of Cyprus and the renewed nationalist spirit of the Turkish Cypriot administration which, supported by the Erdoğan government, claims the formation of

two states. From the Mediterranean to Middle East to Caucasus, Türkiye's role has been on rise. However, although Ankara's strategic autonomy has been so much emphasized, there are some obstacles proving that absolute autonomy is difficult to persevere. Indeed, along the strengthening of domestic security measures aimed at countering terrorist acts and guaranteeing internal stability, there is an escalation of military actions against 'terrorist' targets at regional level. Hence, the resumption of a new nationalist rhetoric, which could also be used instrumentally for electoral purposes. The continuous contacts with the major regional and international players and the delegations organized by Türkiye to raise awareness in the Western community on the need of a ceasefire between Israel and Palestine proves Ankara's ambition to establish itself as a mediator. In this regard, Ankara has proposed a four-party mechanism of guarantor states, which, although it is difficult to implement, remains a crucial dossier on the table of Turkish decision makers. The meeting between Erdoğan and Raisi in Ankara and Putin's visit confirm Türkiye's aims as well to dialogue and mediation. As well of crucial importance is the relationship with the United States, sealed by the visits of the Secretary of State Blinken, which have produced a détente in relations and Türkiye openness on Sweden's access to NATO, a dossier already signed by President Erdoğan and halted by the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. Lastly, on 23 January the Turkish Parliament approved Sweden NATO membership with a reflected effect on the maneuvers of Biden, who finally wrote to Congress urging approval of a 20 billion sale of F-16 aircraft and modernization aircraft to Türkiye.

Lastly, it is also worth mentioning the visit of the Italian PM Giorgia Meloni, the first since her election, whose dossiers concerned not only bilateral relations but also various queenly matters. In this regard, particular importance would have been dedicated to migration issue and cooperation on the Libyan scene.

## 2. Mediterranean Region

### 2.1 Greece – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

September 2023 started with the meeting between the foreign ministers of Greece and Türkiye Giorgos Gerapetritis and Hakan Fidan in Ankara to reach ‘common ground’ for resolving decades-old disputes.<sup>4</sup> At the core of the meeting, the situation in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Few weeks later, at the margins of the UN General Assembly held in New York, Erdogan and Mitsotakis held a closed-door meeting as part of their bilateral engagements, the second after their re-election.<sup>5</sup> According to Turkish media, the meeting was productive and aimed at building confidence between the Parties. Few weeks later, the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye and Greece, Ambassador Burak Akçapar and Mr. Konstantinos Fragogiannis, respectively, met in Athens for the 5th round of discussions on the Joint Action Plan on October 16, 2023, reaffirming their common goal to provide concrete outcomes for the Positive Agenda between the two countries which includes business-economy, tourism, transportation, energy, science and technology, agriculture, environment, social security & health, youth, education and sports.<sup>6</sup>

In a sign of further warming in relations, a “confidence-building meeting” was held in November 13. The exchange, hosted by Turkish Defense Ministry, took place in Ankara between a defense delegation of Greece and its Turkish counterpart.<sup>7</sup> According to the official statement of Turkish MD the meeting was held in a positive spirit: the two sides agreed on implementing or reactivating a number of previously agreed CBMs<sup>8</sup> during year 2024 and to establish a POC mechanism to remain in contact and facilitate their implementation.

On December 7, 2023, the High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) was held in Greece, with Erdoğan paying a landmark visit to the country, thus opening a “new era” in bilateral relations. Erdoğan and Mitsotakis agreed on a roadmap for political dialogue, low-level fields of cooperation and confidence-building steps.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Al Jazeera, *Ministerial meeting heralds warmer relations between Greece and Turkey*, September, 2023. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/5/ministerial-meeting-heralds-warmer-relations-between-greece-and-turkey>

<sup>5</sup> The first meeting between the Parties was held in July, at the sidelines of the Vilnius NATO summit.

<sup>6</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hellenic Republic, Joint Statement following the consultations between the Deputy Foreign Ministers of the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Türkiye, Athens, 17.10.2023, See <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/joint-statement-following-the-consultations-between-the-deputy-foreign-ministers-of-the-hellenic-republic-and-the-republic-of-turkiye-athens-17102023.html>

<sup>7</sup> Daily Sabah, *Turkish, Greek defense delegations gather for rare meeting*, November 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkish-greek-defense-delegations-gather-for-rare-meeting>

<sup>8</sup> Türkiye and Greece had adopted around two dozen confidence-building measures since the late 1980s in order to avoid military confrontation. See Hurriyet Daily News, *Ankara, Athens agree to enhance confidence in Aegean*, November 2023. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-athens-agree-to-enhance-confidence-in-aegean-187830>

<sup>9</sup> Daily Sabah, *Türkiye-Greece declaration reflects political will to deepen ties*, December 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-greece-declaration-reflects-political-will-to-deepen-ties>

### 2.1.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

After years of downs mainly linked to the disputes over territorial waters, airspace violations and militarization of the Aegean Islands, the two neighboring countries are walking the path for full rapprochement. While both “*regional resistance and economic necessity have moderated Türkiye’s pursuit of the maximalist Mavi Vatan maritime posture*”<sup>10</sup> the so-called ‘disaster diplomacy’ has undoubtedly triggered the process, with Greece sending assistance to Türkiye following the February earthquake and Türkiye offering condolences after the deadly train accident in Greece. Although considering that re-approach attempts have had fluctuating courses, the political willingness to move from “friendship in times of trouble” to a sustainable partnership is there, and the bilateral developments of the last few months confirm the purpose. Indeed, the positive attitude of both Greece and Türkiye towards the normalization of bilateral relations continues, mainly cemented by the High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) of December 7. Athens and Ankara signed a joint declaration of 16 points, with MoUs on investment promotion and cooperation, including in the field of small and medium sized enterprises, implementation of the project NEW AC400 kV Interconnection line Türkiye-Greece; Joint declarations on a number of fields such as Agriculture and rural development, sport, vocational education, science and technology cooperation; a statement on the construction of a second border crossing road bridge between the two countries in Kipi-Ipsala, among the other things.

Thus, Greece and Türkiye agreed to reboot their relations and usher in a new era of ties boosting trade, and energy and establishing communication channels between coastguards to tackle migration. After the tensions over the so-called “open door policy” and the pushbacks at the Greek-Turkish border, the two neighbors are now dealing with the issue in a positive climate. During the December 7 meeting, Mitsotakis welcomed the reduction in migratory flows towards Greece, adding that this comes because of the greater cooperation between the police and the coastguards of the two countries.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Greek Prime Minister assured Erdogan that Athens supports the simplification of visa granting for Turkish citizens within the framework of the European *acquis*,<sup>12</sup> announcing that following EU’s approval there will be the possibility for short-term visas for Turkish citizens to visit ten Greek islands.

In the light of a re-engagement between Athens and Ankara, already existent spaces of collaboration also between the EU and Türkiye can be enhanced, and mutual trust rebuilt. Although the resumption of the accession negotiation process is stuck, the migratory issue remains among the main fields for cooperation between the EU and Türkiye. At the end of September, Migration Minister Dimitris Kairidis declared that Greece seeks an agreement for expanding the 2016 Euro-Turkish deal “with Greece’s initiative” as Athens has an immediate interest as a frontline migration state.<sup>13</sup> During the second Türkiye-EU High-Level Dialogue on

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<sup>10</sup> IISS, *Turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, Security and Energy Dynamics*, November 2023 see <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/strategic-dossier-preview-turbulence-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

<sup>11</sup> Euronews, *Greece and Turkey agree to reboot relations following landmark talks in Athens*, December 2023. See <https://www.euronews.com/2023/12/07/greece-and-turkey-agree-to-reboot-relations-following-landmark-talks-in-athens>

<sup>12</sup> Agenzia Nova, *Greek-Turkish relations enter new phase: Mitsotakis and Erdogan sign declaration of good neighborliness*, December 2023. See <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/greece-turkey-relations-enter-new-phase-mitsotakis-and-erdogan-sign-declaration-of-good-neighborliness/>

<sup>13</sup> Hurryet Daily news, *Greece seeks EU-Türkiye migration deal expansion: Minister*, September 2023. See <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/greece-seeks-eu-turkiye-migration-deal-expansion-minister-186506>

Migration and Security held in Brussel at the end of November 2023 the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson and Türkiye Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya discussed the prevention of irregular migration, border security and the fight against migrant smuggling, cooperation of their respective migration and law enforcement agencies, counterterrorism and the fight against organized crime as well as Dialogues on Visa liberalization.<sup>14</sup>

A rapprochement between Greece and Türkiye will also be crucial for maintaining calm in the Eastern Mediterranean. Confidence-building measures in defense and military will be vital for the scope together with people-to-people diplomacy as underlined by Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis in London in late November.<sup>15</sup> The topic is sensitive since in November 2023 the Council of the EU renewed for an additional year its restrictive measures on Türkiye for the 2019 unauthorized drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup>

With the Eastmed pipeline seemingly set aside, major potential competition in the Eastern Mediterranean “remains between energy and infrastructure projects transiting through a southern route -Israel and/or Egypt- and others through a northern one -Türkiye-”<sup>17</sup> with countries seeing their “connector” potential between Asia and Europe as a key opportunity to arise as energy hubs.

That said, a full re-engagement between Greece and Türkiye, which is also deepening relations with Egypt, could at least help initiatives of regional cooperation once the war in Gaza is over, including the EU’s idea for a Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean which has failed to materialize in the last 3 years. Indeed, “A permanent conference on the Eastern Mediterranean as an inclusive yet flexible and demand-driven platform could serve as a framework for discussing and developing possibilities for cooperation, including in the context of new EU legislation and instruments in specific areas such as energy and economic security, connectivity, digital and green transition, and industrial policy.”<sup>18</sup>

The positive climate between the Parties could also facilitate intra-NATO relations. US State Department’s decision to notify Congress of the warplane \$23bn agreement after Turkish parliament’s approval of Sweden’s NATO membership,<sup>19</sup> means a step forward in bilateral ties. However, many issues remain between US and Ankara and a long-lasting positive attitude

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<sup>14</sup> EU Commission, *Joint press release on EU-Türkiye High Level Dialogue on Migration and Security*, November 2023. See [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-press-release-eu-turkiye-high-level-dialogue-migration-and-security-2023-11-24\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-press-release-eu-turkiye-high-level-dialogue-migration-and-security-2023-11-24_en)

<sup>15</sup> Gerapetritis asserted that Türkiye and Greece “have decided to focus not on things to actually separate us, but the things that actually unite us”. A. Bicer, *Window of opportunity: Athens, Ankara look to rise above differences to strengthen ties, says Greek foreign minister*, Anadolu Agency, November 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/window-of-opportunity-athens-ankara-look-to-rise-above-differences-to-strengthen-ties-says-greek-foreign-minister/3066873>

<sup>16</sup> The restrictive measures consist of an asset freeze for listed persons and entities and EU citizens and companies are forbidden from making funds or economic resources available to those listed. In addition, a travel ban to/through the European Union applies to listed persons. Currently, two individuals are listed. See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/11/09/unauthorised-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-prolongs-restrictive-measures/>

<sup>17</sup> IISS, *Turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean: Geopolitical, Security and Energy Dynamics*, November 2023. See <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/strategic-dossier-preview-turbulence-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

<sup>18</sup> See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0050>

<sup>19</sup> Al Jazeera, *Turkey’s parliament approves Sweden’s NATO bid*, January 2024. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/23/turkeys-parliament-set-to-vote-on-swedens-nato-bid-this-week-reports>

towards Greece can provide Türkiye additional credit in front of its NATO allies. Indeed, as reported by Al Jazeera, Democratic Senator Ben Cardin -chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee- stated that his approval of Türkiye's request to purchase F-16 aircraft "*was not a decision I came to lightly, I look forward to beginning this new chapter in our relationship with Turkey, expanding the NATO alliance, and working with our global allies in standing up to ongoing Russian aggression*".<sup>20</sup>

That said, weaknesses in the process for full normalization remain. During High-Level Cooperation Council Erdoğan declared "there's no problem that cannot be solved" between Türkiye and Greece. However, no discussion was held on the delimitation of the continental shelf and Greece's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean. According to Mitsotakis, the issue will be raised at the next political dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

The other open chapter is Cyprus. Despite Erdoğan's declaration that "fair and sustainable resolution of Cyprus dispute will benefit everyone", positions still differ on the path to follow. During the 40th anniversary of the Turkish Cypriot declaration of independence from the southern part of the island,<sup>22</sup> Greece has called on Türkiye to adhere to UN resolutions on the ethnically split Mediterranean island.<sup>23</sup> The issue has also been recalled by the EU report on Türkiye, underlining Brussels commitment to support the UN-led process for a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem "in accordance with the relevant UNSC resolutions and in line with the principles on which the EU is founded and the *acquis*".<sup>24</sup> Cyprus Greek administration and most international community position is to work toward a single state through a bizonal, bicommunal federation with political equality, a vision that is not supported by Ersin Tatar, current president of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as well as Erdoğan, that push for the two-state solution.<sup>25</sup> In September, Greek FMA George Gerapetritis declared that plans for a two-state solution are out of the negotiation agenda, confirming its alignment to the RoC government.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Al Jazeera, *US approves sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey*, January 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/27/us-approves-sale-of-f-16-fighter-jets-to-turkey>

<sup>21</sup> E. Stamatoukou, H.F. Büyük, *Greece, Turkey, Plot New Path With Friendship Declaration*, Balkan Insight, December 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/12/07/greece-turkey-plot-new-path-with-friendship-declaration/>

<sup>22</sup> The self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was established on November 15, 1983. Although having functioning state mechanism, TRNC lacks international recognition, except for Turkey.

<sup>23</sup> Ekathimerini, *Greece urges Turkey to adhere to UN resolutions on Cyprus*, November 2023. See <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1224936/greece-urges-turkey-to-adhere-to-un-resolutions-on-cyprus/>

<sup>24</sup> EU Commission, *Türkiye 2023 Report*. November 2023. See [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD\\_2023\\_696%20T%C3%BCrkiye%20report.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_696%20T%C3%BCrkiye%20report.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> To go into depth, see International Crisis Group, *How to Reinvigorate the UN's Mediation Efforts in Cyprus*, August 2023. See <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europe-mediterranean/cyprus/how-reinvigorate-uns-mediation-efforts-cyprus>

<sup>26</sup> Ekathimerini, *Gerapetritis rebuts Erdogan call for 2 states in Cyprus*, September 2023. See <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1220436/gerapetritis-rebuts-erdogan-call-for-2-states-in-cyprus/>

## 2.2 Egypt –Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

After a decade of deep polarization and diplomatic tensions, Egypt and Türkiye have engaged renewed relations in different fields and strategic issues. 2023 marked an important turning point in the bilateral relations characterized by the increasing tensions in Palestine bringing the two sides closer than ever. In September 2023, just a month before the October 7 attack on Israel, Egypt and Türkiye pushed forward the reconciliation by dispatching, in July 2023, ambassadors for the first time in years<sup>27</sup>.

This breakthrough has been followed by G20 in India meeting during which Türkiye's President Erdoğan met his Egyptian counterpart al-Sisi to discuss a possible increasing in terms of energy, trade, and economic cooperation<sup>28</sup>. However, the actual turning point has been that related to the crisis opened in Gaza after the October 7 attack. Since October 9, different phone calls demonstrated a major cooperation in finding a political solution for the political and humanitarian crisis in Gaza<sup>29</sup>. The focus has notably been in the delivering of the humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, which translated in November 2023 in an Action Group among Muslim countries, among the others, Türkiye and Egypt<sup>30</sup>.

Besides al-Sisi and Erdoğan, the cooperation on Gaza have been characterized also by the role of the respective *first ladies*. Indeed, in November 2023 Egyptian First Lady Intissar al-Sisi received a phone call from her Turkish counterpart Emine Erdoğan for discussing humanitarian aid (51 containers of medical supplies, generators and 20 ambulances, with necessary permissions, were loaded onto a ship from Izmir's Alsancak port and sent to Egypt<sup>31</sup>) to Gaza as well as cooperation on the empowerment of women, youth, and children<sup>32</sup>.

On the defense and security level, although Libya represent a major political challenge, Egypt and Türkiye are moving on an incremented cooperation in defense industry as demonstrated by the arms expo held in Egypt wherein several major Turkish defense firms signed memoranda of understanding (MOU) with Egyptian companies<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> AP News, *Turkey and Egypt reappoint ambassadors and end years of tensions between the regional powers*, July 2023. See <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-egypt-reappoint-ambassadors-9060f3b61e4d01a5c21fdb905f8c09a3>

<sup>28</sup> Reuters, *Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's Sisi discuss energy cooperation at G20 Summit*, September 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-egypts-sisi-discuss-energy-cooperation-g20-summit-turkish-2023-09-10/>

<sup>29</sup> Hafez, 2023 Yearender: *Cairo - The peace broker*, al-Ahram, December 2023. See: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/514281/AIAhram-Weekly/Egypt/-Yearender-Cairo--The-peace-broker.aspx>

<sup>30</sup> Daily Sabah, *Muslim countries create action group for Gaza conflict diplomacy*, November 2023. See: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/muslim-countries-create-action-group-for-gaza-conflict-diplomacy>

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, *Turkey sends field hospital aid ship to Egypt for Gaza*, November 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-sends-field-hospital-aid-ship-egypt-gaza-2023-11-10/>

<sup>32</sup> Egypt Today, *Egyptian First Lady receives phone call from Turkish counterpart on Gaza*, November 2023. See: <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/128418/Egyptian-First-Lady-receives-phone-call-from-Turkish-counterpart-on>

<sup>33</sup> Kayaoglu, *Is Turkey-Egypt rapprochement turning into a long-term defense partnership?* al-Monitor, December 2023. See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/12/turkey-egypt-rapprochement-turning-long-term-defense-partnership#ixzz8OEsxbQQQ>

### 2.2.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

The normalization path carried on by the two countries, Egypt and Türkiye shared some common goals and challenges given by a renewed regional context. The diplomatic and political tensions animating the past decade have been characterized by an ideological substratum since the ousting of the first Egyptian democratically elected president Mohamed Mursi by a coup d'état carried out by the former ministry of defense, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. Türkiye along with Qatar, notably since the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, vigorously sustained Mursi presidency sharing with him the ideological view of political Islam incarnated by the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>34</sup>. The coup and the following generalized repression of the Islamists pushed Türkiye in assuming a rigid position toward Egypt. The reception of a great deal of the Islamist militants in Türkiye and the regional polarization developed among regional powers, generated a general tension bringing, between 2017 and 2020, to the pick of political clash with Libya and East Mediterranean as the main battlefield.

The resumption of the diplomatic channel between the two countries has been slow and gradual since the challenges at the regional and international level have opened a new era of diplomatic patterns. The failure in 2020 of General Haftar (supported by Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia) to take Tripoli (governed by Islamists backed by Türkiye, Qatar and part of the West) and the shock provoked by the war in Ukraine brought the two actors closer<sup>35</sup>.

Although the ideological division persists between Erdoğan and al-Sisi, it became less central since the regional and geopolitical context shifted towards a more realist approach translated into several normalization process starting from the Qatari reintegration in the Gulf Cooperative Council, the breakthrough of the Iranian-Saudi relations and the reintegration of Syria within the Arab League<sup>36</sup>. This approach is the result of an ideological distention among regional powers notably after the deep economic and trade crisis given by covid-19 and the Russian war. This brought regional actors to start a political process that also influenced Egypt and Türkiye.

Indeed, although the two countries have never stopped the economic relations, the political polarization negatively influenced their role in some key contexts: energy and security.

The energy crisis after the Russian war in Ukraine have shaped the development in the reproachment of the two countries since Egypt have become the one of the main LNG exporters in the region and Türkiye one of its main importers<sup>37</sup>. This dossier is directly intertwined with the last five years move of Türkiye foreign policy notably in respect of East Mediterranean issues and its energetic knots. Indeed, if on one side the signature of the MoU between Ankara and Tripoli on the delimitation of maritime zones triggered the tensions with Greece and Cyprus with the official support of Egypt, on the other, as outlined by experts and Egyptian officials, the accords resulted strategic for Egyptian interests, as it would have granted Egypt a sizable maritime concession<sup>38</sup>. It is not a case that the July 2023 diplomatic relaxation draws on the

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<sup>34</sup> Amara, *Fall of Egypt's Mursi splits region*, Reuters, July 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-protests-reaction-idINDEE9630CX20130704/>

<sup>35</sup> See the section on Libya.

<sup>36</sup> For a broader analysis, see: SWP, *Normalization and Realignment in the Middle East*, SWP Comment 2021. See: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C45/>

<sup>37</sup> Reuters, *Egypt to resume LNG exports this month, minister says*, October 2023. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1N3B900T/>

<sup>38</sup> Mada Masr, *what comes after the collapse of Haftar's western campaign?* June 2020. See: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/06/08/feature/politics/what-comes-after-the-collapse-of-haftars-western-campaign/>

energetic dossier as the main cornerstone of this renewed political and economic normalization. This is the main core of the recent diplomatic relations since they could be crucial for both countries: on the one hand it could be strategic for Türkiye in order to go out from isolation within the East Med Gas Forum (given Egypt has been one of the main promoter of the initiative) and on the other it would increase the centrality of Egypt in terms of Natural Gas exporter.

These moves would also be fruitful in terms of security of the region especially in two central contexts: Palestine and Libya.

Since Egypt and Türkiye have been in opposite side in the Libyan civil war, this regional and bilateral normalization could be the core for a new path towards a political solution to curb with the instability in the country<sup>39</sup>. In this sense, the two countries are playing a central role (demonstrated by the recurrent visits of the Libyan officials in Türkiye and Egypt) in mediating among the different actors on the ground. Although the improvements on the ground (freezing the conflict), Libya is still embedded within an internal polarization and political clash that could lead to new tensions and shaping new alliances even at the international level.

However, what seems to be the main security challenge is the war of Israel on Gaza. This event has triggered tensions and worries along the region with a high risk of conflict's expansion. In this context, Türkiye and Egypt seemed to be the most active actors in the region along with Qatar in terms of mediation. The conflict represents indeed a crucial dossier to both, for a number of reasons: security, political legitimacy and energy as well.

Being both actors involved in a broader process of normalization with Israel (despite Egypt formally did not activate a formal process)<sup>40</sup>, they historically, at least on paper, maintained a strong position in condemning Israeli actions against Gaza and since the 2000s they played a major role in mediating between the parts. This time, given the situation on the field and the dimension of the aggression on Gaza, both actors are in front of a broader process. The forced displacement of more than 1 million people to the south of the Strip represents a real threat for the stability of the Egyptian border with the risk of a mass migration within the Sinai<sup>41</sup>. This would jeopardize the stability of an already destabilized area on the Egyptian soil (due to the presence of radical jihadists groups). On the Turkish side, the US consider Türkiye a key actor in the region in terms of mediation, even if Erdoğan refused to meet Blinken in November. Much better was the meeting in the first days of January 2024, between Turkey Minister of Foreign Affairs Fidan and US State Secretary Anthony Blinken during which they discussed about the Gaza crisis and the next steps in terms Sweden accession to NATO. More importantly, this time also Erdoğan met US diplomatic chief with the aim to encourage the political path for Gaza's war by guaranteeing Türkiye a more central role in terms of mediation. The leverage of Türkiye

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<sup>39</sup> For an in-depth analysis, see: Megerisi, *Libya's global civil war*, ECFR Policy Brief, June 2019. [https://ecfr.eu/publication/libyas\\_global\\_civil\\_war/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/libyas_global_civil_war/)

<sup>40</sup> For Türkiye's normalization with Israel, see: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-09-19/ty-article/turkeys-erdogan-reportedly-supports-possible-israel-saudi-normalization-agreement/0000018a-edef-dddd-a1aa-bfef2cb00000>. Egypt has a long history of diplomatic ties with Israel starting, at least, in 1979 after Camp David Accords. See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/-1979-israel-egypt-normalization-meant-to-remove-cairo-from-arab-israeli-conflict-/2546743>

<sup>41</sup> Yeranian, *Egypt Expresses Opposition to Allowing Palestinians from Gaza Into Sinai*, VOA news, October 2023. See: <https://www.voanews.com/a/egypt-expresses-opposition-to-allowing-palestinians-from-gaza-into-sinai/7310915.html>

on Hamas and Palestinian National Authority pushed the US to sponsor Erdoğan as one of the main focal points for the region.

Finally, for both actors, their position on Palestine represents an internal challenge in terms of legitimacy and credibility. The strong Palestinian sentiment within both countries manifested more than once their opposition to the Israeli aggression showing their solidarity with Palestine. For this reason, at least in this phase, both governments are maintaining critique position towards Israel and also towards the international community<sup>42</sup>. Furthermore, both actors are fully aware of the risk of a conflict expansion and their repercussions on other strategic dossier that are leading the process of normalization. Given both Israel and Palestinian Authority are in the East Med Gas Forum (EMGF), both countries have a heavy responsibility on their back in terms of economic and energetic interests.

### **2.3 Libya-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments**

The last months of 2023 have been characterized by intensifying diplomatic moves among Türkiye and Libya although tension and instability in the North African country remained central. Indeed, the flood that stuck Eastern Libya in September 2023 represented an opportunity to present their condolences for the victims of the flood to the Head of the Libyan Presidential Council al-Menfi and providing humanitarian by sending a cargo ship<sup>43</sup>.

In October, given the continuing tensions in the country, the Turkish parliament voted for an extension of the presence of Turkish troops until 2026 (notably deployed in the Western part) with the aim to ensure the ceasefire in the country and guarantee the implementation of the political dialogue. The bill has then ratified in December.

In addition, in October, during the meeting Türkiye-Africa Business and Economic Forum, the Libyan foreign Minister, Mohammed Al-Huweij, and his Turkish counterpart, Ömer Bolat, met to reinforce the economic cooperation between the two countries<sup>44</sup>

In the same month, Türkiye and Libya revived the controversial accord on Gas and Oil exploration in the Mediterranean, but this time, as outlined by officials and experts, should be a turning point since it seems to be in line with the broader general interests of all actors in the region (notably Egypt and Greece)<sup>45</sup>.

In November 2023, an increasing diplomatic course took its way by the visit of the President of the Libyan House of Representative (HoR) to Türkiye with the aim to unify the Libyan institutions and to have a narrow relation in terms of economic development and trade.

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<sup>42</sup> For an in-depth analysis, see: Aydıntaşbaş; Huggard, *Understanding Turkey's response to the Israel-Gaza crisis*, Brookings, December 2023. See:

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-turkeys-response-to-the-israel-gaza-crisis/>

<sup>43</sup> Bayar, *Turkish president extends condolences to Libya over deadly floods*, AA, September 2023. See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkish-president-extends-condolences-to-libya-over-deadly-floods/2990464>

<sup>44</sup> Assad, *Libya, Turkey discuss strengthening trade cooperation*, Libya Observer October 2023. See: <https://libyaobserver.ly/economy/libya-turkey-discuss-strengthening-trade-cooperation>

<sup>45</sup> Nordic Monitor, *Turkey retrieves controversial oil and gas deal with Libya from the shelf*, October 2023. See: <https://nordicmonitor.com/2023/10/turkey-retrieves-controversial-oil-and-gas-deal-with-libya-from-the-shelf/>

### 2.3.1 Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications

Libyan-Turkish relations in these last months have been characterized by continuing diplomatic, military, and humanitarian exchanges. Libya was struck by floods in which more than 4,300 people were killed, causing dams to burst and destroyed buildings in many towns, particularly in Al Bayda, Al Marj and in the coastal city of Derna. The storm also caused significant damage to critical infrastructure, including bridges, roads, and electricity grids. This pushed Türkiye to intervene and sending humanitarian aid, notably a cargo for hospitals facilities and goods for basic needs. The support of the Turkish government to the Eastern region is too significant in terms of political and diplomatic sense since it is managed by the Lord war Khalifa Haftar, one of the main rivalries of the Western Libya government, which is supported by the UN and international community along with Türkiye.

Furthermore, what seems to have been advancing on the political side is the general normalization of the region affecting the situation in Libya with the main actors, who have been involved in the conflict, starting to take on a political dialogue. In this context the three main challenges this new phase of the conflict has to deal with are: security, energy and the Libyan political dialogue.

The choice of the Turkish parliament to confirm their military presence in Libya confirmed a certain centrality of the security. Despite the opposition of the Eastern governments Libya (opposing the Turkish presence) for Tripoli it means a strategic presence to avoid further tensions and attacks from the East. Indeed, if on one side foreign forces are present on both sides (mercenaries from Sudan and Syria are supporting Haftar, along with logistical and military support from UAE), the Turkish intervention in 2020 after the East's attack on Tripoli, prevented a debacle of the UN backed government and, in some ways, saved the weak institutions created. For this reason, although Libya as it was in 2020 needs an external neutral force, to advance the political process, the presence of Türkiye, as many officials in Tripoli claimed, could support the empowerment of the military capacity of Libya.

The military presence's extension should be conceived also in terms of increasing economic and trade interests between the two countries. The official meetings in September and December had at their core the energy and economic dossier notably in terms of investments, energy deal and infrastructure reconstruction. The first move in this direction has been the removing of tariffs on Libyan imports in Türkiye to avoid a double taxation and excluding Libya from the 40 percent tax imposed on Libyan companies, as a guarantee by Turkish banks, and accepting cash payment instead of suspended bank transfers from Libyan banks<sup>46</sup>. This has been facilitated by the institutional infrastructure that the two countries built in the recent times. The Libyan-Turkish Joint Committee represents the main platform to reinforce the relationship in terms of economic interests. This would also include the energy challenges and involve the whole Mediterranean since the MoU signed in 2019 between Libya and Türkiye triggered tensions among regional states as Greece, Egypt, Cyprus and Israel<sup>47</sup>. The MoU should be considered a move by Türkiye

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<sup>46</sup> Zaptia, *Turkey-Libyan trade agreement to remove tariffs on Libyan imports, prevent double taxation*, October 2023. See: <https://libyaherald.com/2023/10/turkey-libyan-trade-agreement-to-remove-tariffs-on-libyan-imports-prevent-double-taxation/>

<sup>47</sup> Critics argued that the agreement also poses legal and sovereignty concerns, particularly concerning the 2019 agreement between Turkey and the former Libyan Government of National Accord on the delimitation of maritime borders and its potential impact on the eastern Mediterranean. See: Nordic Monitor, *Turkey retrieves controversial oil and gas deal with Libya from the shelf*, October 2023. See: <https://nordicmonitor.com/2023/10/turkey-retrieves-controversial-oil-and-gas-deal-with-libya-from-the-shelf/>

to curb with a regional isolation since the formation of the East Med Gas Forum. However, the regional normalization along with the modifies of the MoU (the new draft does not mention the 2019 accord) should facilitate, despite is still a real challenge, the dialogue among the countries of the Forum. In this respect, either Egypt or Greece, two main opponents of the MoU, in recent time showed a more moderate position since the meeting at United Nations General Assembly in New York in September, President Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis held discussions with the aim to de-escalate tensions between the two countries. This would also affect the internal dynamic of Libya since the energy resources are the main source of the State to maintain a certain stability of the country but also would ease the political dialogue.

Indeed, despite differences in terms of ideology remained and are still provoking tensions in the country, the normalization with Egypt (opposing the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood within Tripoli's government) would increment the national dialogue<sup>48</sup>. The de-escalation within the region among different political views (Brotherhood vs Islamists), could facilitate the national dialogue. However, it should be underlined that the main factions that are now animating the tensions within the country should deconstruct all their territorial power that go beyond the simple ideological schema. Local groups, tribes, and divisions of the country into two main opposite parts require a broader transitional process that could be supported by a 'neutral' third part.

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<sup>48</sup> See the section on Egypt.

## 3. The Middle East

### 3.1. Syria-Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The intention of Turkish MoFA to directly communicate with his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Mekdad, was a turning point for the normalization efforts of Türkiye in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> In this frame, the former FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu informed the public that he could meet FM Mekdad early in February 2023. This attitude was earliest of its kind since the 2011 Syrian revolt. As an early reaction to Türkiye's attempt to normalize with the Assad Regime, Assad worded Türkiye as 'foe-enemy' claiming the conditions for a probable normalization. He delineated the provisions such as the withdrawal of the Turkish military from Syria and stopping the support of the Syrian National Army.<sup>50</sup> The response of the Turkish President Erdoğan was loaded with optimism, proposing a peace process. For him, the Ministers of Defense of Russia, the Assad Regime, and Türkiye would meet in Moscow before another trilateral meeting of Ministries of Foreign Affairs.<sup>51</sup> The Defense Ministers met in Moscow at the end of December 2022 as was agreed through Russian facilitation. Russia's quest<sup>52</sup> was consistent with the interests of both Russia and Türkiye by excluding Iranians. The initial assessments after this statement were that Russia intended to balance Iran with Türkiye after the Russian aggression on Ukraine not to lose initiative in Syria's landscape. Being aware of such an attitude, the Iranian approach to the normalization effort of the Turkish government was gradual and cautious. The initial Russian and Turkish position to exclude Iran from the process mobilized the Iranian Foreign Minister Abdullahiyan to pay a visit to Damascus on 14 January 2023. Syria's Foreign Minister Mekdad repeated the regime's narrative that the normalization is an impasse unless the Turkish withdrawal from Syria is realized.<sup>53</sup> The Iranian Foreign Minister was more balanced since Iran pushed itself into the Moscow Mechanism by a request to Russians, proposing Iran's 'constructive contribution'.<sup>54</sup> Hence, the visit of the Abdullahiyan to Damascus was to

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<sup>49</sup> REUTERS, *Turkish foreign minister says he could meet Syrian counterpart early February*, The Jerusalem Post, 12 January 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-728377>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>50</sup> REUTERS, *Assad says Turkey talks must be based on ending 'occupation'*, The Jerusalem Post, 13 January 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-728463>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>51</sup> REUTERS, *'Leaders of Turkey, Syria could meet for peace – Erdogan'*, REUTERS, 06 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/leaders-turkey-syria-could-meet-peace-erdogan-2023-01-05/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>52</sup> SETH J. FRANTZMAN, *'Russia still working on 'historic' meeting with Turkey, Iran and Syria'*, The Jerusalem Post, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-730584>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>53</sup> BBC Türkçe, *'Suriye Dışişleri Bakanı: "İşgal sona ermeden ilişkiler normalleşemez"*, 14 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c51ldx8lyg8o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>54</sup> Ece Göksedef, *'İran, Türkiye-Suriye görüşmelerine ve normalleşme sürecine nasıl bakıyor?'*, BBC Türkçe, 25 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cp4q94vp8y7o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

emphasize Iran's vital influence on the Assad Regime as if they will not let the Regime normalize with Türkiye unless they are at the table.

The Syrian Interim Government (SIG) responded to the circulation of this statement with a balanced stance. The PM of SIG Abdurrahman Mustafa informed that they are not worried about such an initiative.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand; the armed groups, which are oriented with conservative teachings - mainly in Idlib, reacted to the words of President Erdoğan. Both Heyet-e Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Ahrar-u Sham opposed the idea of normalization and claimed that they would not settle with the Assad Regime.<sup>56</sup>

The February 6<sup>th</sup> earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria, on the other hand, positively shifted the course of normalization. Türkiye, devastated by earthquakes, opened the border to the north of Syria, disregarding SNA or the Regime-held areas for humanitarian aid.<sup>57</sup> As a response, the Assad Regime facilitated the UN aid to reach the SNA-held areas, after a long period of obstruction to the UN aid to civilians in the north.<sup>58</sup> The positive atmosphere praised the normalization efforts that led to a quartet meeting in Moscow by the representation of vice Ministers of Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and the Assad Regime.<sup>59</sup> The hope was another meeting facilitating a ministerial quartet to conclude concrete steps.<sup>60</sup> Russian statement was to have both Syria and Türkiye to avoid focusing on 'pains of the past' through constructive and flexible communication.<sup>61</sup> The Russian method was to set a roadmap for the parties.<sup>62</sup> President Erdoğan's comment on the normalization with Assad was with welcoming words prior to his visit to the Gulf countries. Erdoğan delineated his intention with clear words: 'We are not closed to meet Bashar Assad. They demand the withdrawal of our forces from the north. There cannot be such an issue. We are countering terrorism there. There must be a fair approach. We can overcome all problems'. This statement portrayed the exact Turkish stance to continue the normalization in July 2023.<sup>63</sup> Assad, on the other hand, replied Erdoğan with a negative

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<sup>55</sup> BBC Turkish, 'Suriyeli muhalifler, Türkiye ve Suriye arasındaki yeni sürece nasıl bakıyor?', BBC Türkçe, 04 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c2vnqejyv7do>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>56</sup> BBC Türkçe, 'Suriye'deki Esad karşıtı silahlı İslamcı gruplar Ankara'nın Şam ile normalleşme çabalarına tepkili', 06 January 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cjmvmv2gm7k3o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>57</sup> REUTERS, 'Turkey may open border to Syrian government-held region for aid', The Jerusalem Post, 10 February 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-731206>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>58</sup> BBC Türkçe, 'BM: Türkiye'den açılan sınır kapısından Suriye'nin kuzeyine ilk yardım konvoyu geçiş yaptı', 14 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cl4vg00rjvno>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>59</sup> BBC Türkçe, 'Türkiye-Suriye normalleşme süreci: İran'ın da katılımıyla ikinci aşamaya geçiliyor', BBC Türkçe, 08 March 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cl5jky27kkwo>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>60</sup> Sefa Karacan, 'Suriye konulu toplantı Moskova'da başladı', Anadolu Ajansı, 04 April 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriye-konulu-toplanti-moskovada-basladi/2862799>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>61</sup> BBC Türkçe, 'Rusya'dan 'kapsamlı normalleşme' görüşmelerini sürdüren Türkiye ve Suriye'ye çağrı: Geçmiş acılara odaklanmayın', 05 April 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/ceq5z21ney3o>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>62</sup> Aljazeera, 'Russia, Syria, Turkey and Iran hold high-level talks in Moscow', Aljazeera, 10 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/10/russia-syria-turkey-and-iran-hold-high-level-talks-in-moscow>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>63</sup> Medyascope, 'Erdoğan: "Esed'le görüşmeye kapalı değiliz"', Medyascope, 17 July 2023, <https://medyascope.tv/2023/07/17/erdogan-esedle-gorusmeye-kapali-degiliz/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

connotation: “I will not meet Erdoğan under the conditions of him. We cannot meet to drink orange juice”.<sup>64</sup> The negative attitude of Assad did not change lately whilst Türkiye appears insistent on negotiations with no conditions. The Turkish soldiers, for the Turkish leadership, may return home only if there can be set a stable Syria through a democratic transition under the UN observation.

### 3.1.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

Türkiye hosts approximately 3,7 million registered Syrians with the status of ‘person under protection’. The ones with no registration are illegally in the country. Besides any escalation at the north may potentially push at least 4 to 5 million Syrians towards Türkiye or the other neighboring countries. The continuous conflicts in Idlib are an essential concern for the Turkish authorities since the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is such high that an escalation of the armed groups or Russia and Iran-backed Assad forces may suddenly increase tension causing a mass demographic movement. Nevertheless, irregular immigration has been a calm social phenomenon for the last term. On the other hand, Türkiye’s election in 2023 provoked the debates on Syrians in Türkiye and critiques of President Erdoğan’s ‘open door’ policy for the ones deprived of security due to conflicts. The opposition parties started campaigns to forcefully send Syrians back to their countries or any other destination. Per the atmosphere of the May 2023 elections, another input on the Syrians in Türkiye was the impact of the February 6<sup>th</sup> earthquakes. This natural disaster has ruined the major cities close to the Syrian border such as Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, or the districts in the vicinity. A small number of Syrians returned their country after the earthquakes.<sup>65</sup>The tense election campaign led the Turkish politicians and intellectuals blended with polarized views on the governmental policies regarding Syria crisis or immigration. In this context, the opposing figures harshly criticized President Erdoğan’s ‘Syria policy’ because direct communication with Bashar Assad was their proposal during the last decade. The Syrians ‘under protection’ was the forerunning heading in the public debates and social media. The voters in favor of Erdoğan were more prone to comply with the already practiced policies based on humanitarian concerns, while the ones, prone to the opposition, harshly circulated negative narratives. After all, the polarization of the public came to a culmination point when the Erdoğan-led Government qualified for another five-year term after the elections. Nowadays, due to the financial crisis combined to an increased nationalist spirit, the sentiment towards Syrians in Türkiye is experiencing a critical turning point. The balance remains fragile.

Another crucial element, in the relations with Syria is the security. PKK’s Syria and Iraq basing, which has become a permanent posture, is a primary security concern for Turkish leadership. Once three political resolutions of the terror issue have failed for the last four decades, Türkiye started an active and pre-emptive counterterror strategy after the July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt of FETO. The Euphrates Shield Operation and three concurrent military campaigns targeted both

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<sup>64</sup> BBC Türkçe, “*Suriye lideri Esad: Erdoğan ile onun koşulları altında görüşmem*”, Cumhuriyet Gazetesi, 09 August 2023, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/dunya/suriye-lideri-esad-erdogan-ile-onun-kosullari-altinda-gorusmem-2107002>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>65</sup> Euronews, “*Türkiye’de depremde etkilenen Suriyelilerin bir kısmı ülkelerine geri dönüyor*”, Euronews, 17 February 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/02/17/turkiyede-depremden-etkilenen-suriyelilerin-bir-kismi-ulkelerine-geri-donuyor>, accessed on 21 December 2023

DAESH and PKK in Syria while Türkiye continuously hit PKK's bases in Iraq. The recent term witnessed PKK attacks targeting the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Ankara on 1 October 2023<sup>66</sup>. Türkiye retaliated these attacks through air raids on PKK/PYD bases in Syria on 5 October 2023 targeting critical infrastructure built by the support of the U.S.-led Coalition. The response of the USA was downing a Turkish UAV, which was navigating to search PKK targets on the same day, claiming a self-defense justification<sup>67</sup>. Hence, Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts have become also an issue of friction between Türkiye and the US. Hence, PKK started three other waves of terror attacks on Turkish soldiers in Iraq at the end of December 2023 and in January 2024. Moreover, PKK cells infiltrated the positions of Turkish military units in two concurrent attacks on 22 and 23 December 2023<sup>68</sup>. The third attack was on 11 January 2024 targeting another Turkish base. Türkiye's response was asymmetric by focusing on the PKK infrastructure in Syria, mainly the depots, bases, and oil facilities. Foreign Minister Fidan announced that there is no demarcation between Iraq and Syria in terms of responding any terror attack. Minister of Defense Yaşar Güler, on the other hand, pointed out a series of further operations with an increasing pace, targeting PKK<sup>69</sup>. Erdoğan's complementing speech confirmed the Turkish Ministers circulating a probable massive military campaign either in Iraq or in Syria during the coming months<sup>70</sup>.

### 3.2. Israel/Palestine - Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The normalization process between Türkiye and Israel has matured through talks between intelligence services and track-II diplomacy efforts of civil society organizations. The normalization efforts started in 2015 despite the verbal tensions. Within this framework, the parties held direct talks at the levels of the Presidents, Prime Minister, and Ministers of Foreign Affairs, resulting in the appointment of Ambassadors to the Capitals. President Herzog, first, visited Ankara in March 2022 and the former Israeli PM Yair Lapid met with President Erdoğan on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2022 afterward.

Erdoğan talked about joint energy projects following the meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu in New York, which signaled a new phase after normalization<sup>71</sup>. Turkish leadership was expecting Netanyahu to sign an agreement if the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack would not change the course of normalization in the frame of a joint visit by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in

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<sup>66</sup> MoI, <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/bakanligimiz-emniyet-genel-mudurlugu-girisine-saldiri-girisiminde-bulunan-ve-engellenerek-oldurulen-2-teroristin-kimligi-hakkinda-basin-aciklamasi>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

<sup>67</sup> EURONEWS, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/10/05/abd-f-16si-suriyede-turk-insansiz-hava-aracini-dusurdu>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

<sup>68</sup> BBC Turkish, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cq51dnyrq5ro>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>69</sup> BBC Turkish, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cye6rw67ynro>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Directorate of Communications, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-turkiye-basarili-sinir-otesi-operasyonlariyla-topraklari-uzerinde-ameliyat-yaptirmayacagini-cok-acik-ve-net-gostermistir>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Toi Staff, ‘‘ *Erdogan says hopes to soon start work with Israel on energy drilling, networks*’’, The Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-says-hopes-to-soon-start-work-with-israel-on-energy-drilling-networks/>, 22.09.2023, accessed on 21 December 2023

July 2023<sup>72</sup>. Energy cooperation was the primary heading in the expected visit that could facilitate the transfer of energy resources to European markets. Netanyahu postponed his visit due to his health conditions and the Israeli military campaign permanently stopped the positive resonance of both countries. Erdoğan also dropped his reciprocal visit from the agenda due to the Gaza intervention and humanitarian situation<sup>73</sup>.

The response of Israel to the October 7<sup>th</sup> challenged the relations of both countries another time. The Ambassadors returned to their countries for security reasons<sup>74</sup> or consultations while narratives of leaderships left a limited hope for the sake of continuing the repaired ties<sup>75</sup>. Erdoğan was selective in his wording after the October 7<sup>th</sup>, though; the civilian casualties due to the indiscriminate targeting of Gaza increased the tension in his speeches. Erdoğan warned Israel to “act like a state or be treated as an organization” other than the option of being tried before the International Criminal Court. On the other hand, Netanyahu claimed ‘Kurds’ to build a parallel wording. An article on the expected activities of MOSSAD to assassinate the Hamas members in Lebanon, Türkiye or Jordan provoked Erdoğan’s speech emphasizing “a very heavy price” on Israel once they attempt it<sup>76</sup>. Despite the Minister of Foreign Affairs and MIT warned the Israeli diplomats not to act in Türkiye, the Turkish Intelligence started an operation on 2 January 2024 rounding up 30 Mossad members<sup>77</sup>. The circulated media announcement of the Turkish Intelligence clearly informed the public about the methods used by MOSSAD and their identified activities<sup>78</sup>. Despite the escalating narratives of both Israel and Türkiye, Erdoğan left room for a probable facilitation effort with concrete proposals<sup>79</sup>. In this frame, President Erdoğan and FM Fidan delineated a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders<sup>80</sup>. Another proposal was

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<sup>72</sup> Daily Sabah, “*Palestinian President Abbas, Israeli PM Netanyahu to visit Türkiye*”, Daily Sabah, 20 July 2023, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/palestinian-president-abbas-israeli-pm-netanyahu-to-visit-turkiye>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>73</sup> Doğukan Keskinç, “*Türkiye’s Erdogan scraps Israel trip over ‘inhumane’ Gaza war*”, Middle East Monitor, 27.10.2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231027-turkiyes-erdogan-scraps-israel-trip-over-inhumane-gaza-war/>, accessed on 21.12.2023

<sup>74</sup> TOI Staff, “*Israel bringing diplomats home from Turkey after warning its citizens to leave*”, 19 October 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-bringing-diplomats-home-from-turkey-after-warning-citizens-to-leave/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>75</sup> Dilara Şenkaya, “*Turkey recalls ambassador to Israel over ‘humanitarian tragedy in Gaza’*”, Aljazeera, 04 November 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/4/turkey-recalls-ambassador-to-israel-for-consultations-as-gaza-bombing-rages>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>76</sup> Toi Staff, “*Erdogan warns Israel of ‘very heavy price’ if Hamas members harmed on Turkish soil*”, The Times of Israel, 6 December 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-warns-israel-of-very-heavy-price-if-hamas-members-harmed-on-turkish-soil/>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>77</sup> Al Monitor, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/only-first-step-turkeys-erdogan-flaunts-anti-mossad-op-against-israel>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>78</sup> AA, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/3-soruda-mitten-mossada-son-darbe-nekropol-operasyonu/3103055>, accessed on 17 January 2023.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Wilkins, “*Gaza war pushes tumultuous Israel-Turkey ties into ‘deep freezer’*”, Al Jazeera, 14.11.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/14/gaza-war-pushes-tumultuous-israel-turkey-ties-into-deep-freezer>, accessed on 21 December 2023

<sup>80</sup> TRT World, “*Turkish foreign minister calls for Gaza ceasefire, two-state solution*”, TRT World, 21 December 2023, <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkish-foreign-minister-calls-for-gaza-ceasefire-two-state-solution-16335466>, accessed on 21 December 2023

to set a guarantor modal that would include Türkiye and the other countries in charge of observing the situation in Gaza and securing Israel.<sup>81</sup> The idea appears to be a not-favored solution for the Israeli side, even though there was no response for it. This option, actually, was not a course after Erdoğan called Israel as a ‘terror’ state but Hamas is not<sup>82</sup>. Another narrative of Erdoğan was that Israel’s act was a “massacre” because “even wars have amorality”<sup>83</sup>. Finally, Türkiye started a political campaign to urge the Muslim and Arab countries present solidarity and resilience in resolving the Gaza conflict and overall Palestinian issue. FM Fidan consulted to the other ministers to build a Contact Group comprised of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The purpose was to persuade the other countries to come to the terms of a permanent ceasefire. It was a conclusive effort because the UN General Assembly made five decisions favoring the Palestinian cause<sup>84</sup>. Moreover, Türkiye backed ICJ’s resolution to South Africa's genocide case against Israel providing material as well taken in Gaza by State News Agency *Anadolu*.<sup>85</sup> In this sense, The Turkish objective of running a judicial mechanism on Israel has been proceeding in the long run.

### 3.2.1 Criticalities, spillovers on Türkiye and beyond

Ideology and religion are a critical factor as for Türkiye is related to the status of Jerusalem. Türkiye does not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel despite the efforts of the Trump-led U.S. Government. Türkiye’s initial reaction to the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack and Israeli campaign was loaded with a sensitive red line, which is Jerusalem. In this sense, Türkiye projected the courses on what could happen as far as the conflict escalates and reminded the Masjid-i Aksa as ‘not-touchable’ in the frame of religious faith. As a matter of fact, Türkiye’s public is more prone to Palestinian cause although the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack finds no sympathy. The circulated images in the media, after the Israeli military campaign, provoked the anti-Israel emotion in hearts and minds. On the other hand, this discourse did not become a widespread political wave other than protests. Shortly, Erdoğan’s Palestinian-centric narrative, on the other hand, finds a landscape in Türkiye. Therefore, the normalization, which was concluded, has stalled for another long term. In this context, both countries will be hesitant to build a constructive ‘win-win’ strategy until the Gaza issue is fairly resolved. Erdoğan is more focused on Netanyahu in the initial stage of the Israeli intervention, though; the relations will remain frozen due to his narratives like ‘Hamas is not a terrorist organization’, ‘Israel should act as a state, not an organization’, or “Israel is a terror

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<sup>81</sup> Murat Aslan, “Türkiye’s guarantor proposal and the failure of Netanyahu”, AA, 28 December 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-turkiyes-guarantor-proposal-and-the-failure-of-netanyahu/3094777>, accessed on 28 December 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Jerusalem Post Staff, ‘ Turkey’s Erdogan calls Israel ‘terror state’, slams West’, The Jerusalem Post, 15.11.2023, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-773316>, accessed on 21.12.2023.

<sup>83</sup> Aljazeera, ‘ Turkey’s Erdogan calls Israeli siege and bombing of Gaza a ‘massacre’ ‘, Aljazeera, 11.10.2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/11/turkeys-erdogan-calls-israeli-siege-and-bombing-of-gaza-a-massacre>, accessed on 21.12.2023

<sup>84</sup> Awad Rjoob, Mehmet Nuri Uçar, “BM Genel Kurulu, Filistin lehine 5 kararı kabul etti”, AA, 8 Aralık 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/bm-genel-kurulu-filistin-lehine-5-karari-kabul-etti/3076592#:~:text=%C4%B0%C5%9Fgal%20alt%C4%B1nda%20bulunan%20Filistin%20topraklar%C4%B1nda ki.%C3%BCIke%20ise%20oylamada%20%C3%A7ekimser%20kald%C4%B1>, accessed on 28 December 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Z. Demirci and S. Aksunger, *Turkish parliament delegation urges swift resolution in South Africa's genocide case against Israel at ICJ*, AA, January 2024. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-parliament-delegation-urges-swift-resolution-in-south-africas-genocide-case-against-israel-at-icj/3107012>

state”. On the other hand, the Israeli response through ‘Kurds’ deepened the division of both countries. That is why PKK’s attack on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of December in the north of Iraq has been correlated to a conspiracy theory, in which the experts blamed the Israeli government for ordering the PKK attack targeting Turkish soldiers<sup>86</sup>. Besides, another critical element is related to migration concerns. Israeli Government has put forward the idea that all Gaza residents are Hamas and must be deported to other countries. In this sense, Israel proposed Egypt accept the Palestinians to be settled in Sinai Dessert with a pledge of paying the Egyptian debts to the IMF<sup>87</sup>. The Egyptian government rejected this proposal, though; the Israeli government did not announce what strategy they would pursue as far as they fully control Gaza. Such a course will increase the concerns about an immigration wave in the coming months. Türkiye currently accepts a limited number of severely wounded other than the patients in need of cancer treatment. However, Türkiye’s mediator role in this conflict is difficult to accomplish. The EU and Türkiye are politically divided on the Gaza issue, mainly because Ankara does not recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization. On the other hand, energy and security may experience new frictions. Already, the fight on PKK/PYD, groups considered be supported by Israel, may further escalate.

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<sup>86</sup> See paragraph on Syria.

<sup>87</sup> Katherine Hearst, “*Israel-Palestine war: Israel reportedly proposed writing off Egypt's debts for hosting Gaza refugees*”, MEE, 31 October 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-netanyahu-lobbied-eu-push-egypt-accept-gaza-refugees>, accessed on 28 December 2023.

## 4. Gulf Region

### 4.1 UAE – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) agreed between the UAE and Türkiye earlier in March, entered into force in September 2023. CEPA aims to strengthen economic relationships and increase bilateral trade between the UAE and Türkiye by establishing a free trade area, eliminating or reducing tariffs, removing trade barriers, and providing a favorable climate for trade.<sup>88</sup> It aims to reach a trade volume between the two countries of \$25 billion within five years.<sup>89</sup> Also in September, UAE Ministry of Education Ahmad Belhoul Al Falasi signed an MoU with Council of Higher Education (HE) in Türkiye aimed at collaborating in HE sector by sharing knowledge in scientific and educational areas, including by creating and enhancing joint degree programs across bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels.<sup>90</sup>

After the outbreak of Israel-Hamas war, exchanges between the Parties have increased and, later in October, Hakan Fidan paid a 2-day visit to the UAE.<sup>91</sup> Turkey's MFA was received by President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss efforts to enhance the humanitarian response for civilians affected by the crisis in the Gaza Strip and the responsibility of the international community towards achieving a just, comprehensive, and stable peace in the Middle East, as well as cooperation and joint efforts between the UAE and Türkiye.<sup>92</sup> Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has attended 2023 UN Climate Change Conference in the UAE, held between 30 November and 12 December. In mid-December Erdogan and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al Nayan spoke by phone over Gaza. During the call Erdogan underlined the need of implementing the decisions taken at the joint summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League and continuing initiatives to increase the international community's support for Palestine in the "spirit of unity".<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Deloitte, *Türkiye Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)*, October 2023. See <https://www2.deloitte.com/xs/en/pages/tax/articles/turkiye-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement.html>

<sup>89</sup> M. ÇELİK, *UAE open to new defense agreements with Türkiye: Envoy*, Daily Sabah, September 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/uae-open-to-new-defense-agreements-with-turkiye-envoy>

<sup>90</sup> S.A. Joseph, *UAE Ministry of Education signs MoU with Council of Higher Education in Turkey*, GCC Business News, September 2023. See <https://www.gccbusinessnews.com/uae-signs-mou-with-turkey/>

<sup>91</sup> M. E. Calli, *Turkish foreign minister starting 2-day visit to UAE to discuss deepening bilateral cooperation*, Anadol Agency, October 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-foreign-minister-starting-2-day-visit-to-uae-to-discuss-deepening-bilateral-cooperation/3030260>

<sup>92</sup> Emirati news, *UAE President receives Foreign Minister of Türkiye*, October 2023. See <https://emirati.news/uae-president-receives-foreign-minister-of-turkiye/>

<sup>93</sup> E. Tekin, *Turkish, UAE presidents discuss Gaza situation*, Anadol Agency, December 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkish-uae-presidents-discuss-gaza-situation/3083903>

## 4.2. Saudi Arabia – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

At the sidelines of G20 summit in September, Erdoğan held direct talks with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman. During the meeting, bilateral relations, regional and global issues were discussed, including new opportunities for cooperation in the energy sector.<sup>94</sup> In mid-October the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce, the Türkiye Exporters Assembly and the Turkish Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD) met in Istanbul within the Saudi-Turkish Business Forum to discuss investment opportunities and increase trade exchange.<sup>95</sup>

Few days after the outbreak of the war in Gaza, Turkish President discussed by phone with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the military escalation in Gaza, with the aim of joint coordination to stop the ongoing escalation.<sup>96</sup> Along the same efforts and commitments, Erdoğan paid a visit to Riyadh in November to attend the extraordinary joint Arab-Islamic summit, which addressed the situation in Gaza. During the meeting Erdoğan stated that Israel's attacks had reached the level of a massacre, and that the Islamic world should work in unity to ensure peace in the region, also expressing Türkiye's continuous assistance to humanitarian aid for providing medical assistance to the people in need.<sup>97</sup>

## 4.3. Qatar – Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

September 2023 marked the anniversary of 50<sup>th</sup> year of diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Qatar. Cooperation between the countries, that has strengthened particularly since 2011, cover various fields including trade, investments, military, and defense, that also translates into joint participation to military exercises of third Parties, as happened with the Eternal Brotherhood-II military exercise held in Pakistan between 17-30 September 2023.<sup>98</sup>

At the beginning of October Qatar-Türkiye Business Forum was held in Doha. During the meeting, Turkish Minister of Trade Omer Bolat praised the relations between the two countries, noting that these close strategic relations cover all fields, especially the economic and commercial spheres. The forum reviewed cooperation relations and investment climate between Qatar and Türkiye.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> TRT Italy, *Erdoğan, incontro con Salman e al-Sisi a Nuova Delhi*, September 2023. See <https://www.trt.net.tr/italiano/turkiye-4/2023/09/10/erdogan-incontro-con-salman-e-al-sisi-a-nuova-delhi-2035343>

<sup>95</sup> Ajel news, *Saudi-Turkish Business Forum Discusses Increasing Volume of Trade*, October 2023. See <https://english.ajel.sa/business/saudi-turkish-business-forum-discusses-increasing-volume-of-trade-2>

<sup>96</sup> Arab news, *Saudi crown prince, Turkish president discuss military escalation in Gaza*, October 2023. See <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2389636/saudi-arabia>

<sup>97</sup> AKP Parti, *Statement on President Erdoğan's meeting with Crown Prince bin Salman of Saudi Arabia*, see <https://www.akparti.org.tr/en/news/statement-on-president-erdogan-s-meeting-with-crown-prince-bin-salman-of-saudi-arabia-11-11-2023-23-36-24/>

<sup>98</sup> F. Salari, *Qatar and Turkiye join Pakistan in 'Eternal Brotherhood-II' military exercise*, Doha News, September 2023. See <https://dohanews.co/qatar-turkey-join-pakistan-in-eternal-brotherhood-ii-military-exercise/>

<sup>99</sup> Qatar News Agency, *Qatar, Turkiye Enjoy Close Strategic Relations in Various Fields, Says Turkish Trade Minister*, October 2023. See <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2023-10/02/0052-qatar.-turkiye-enjoy-close-strategic-relations-in-various-fields.-says-turkish-trade-minister>

With the outbreak of the war in Gaza, and due to their links with Hamas, Qatar and Türkiye coordinated their efforts to facilitate the release of hostages. In addition, a month on the war in Gaza, Moza bint Nasser, Sheikha of Qatar, participated in “United for Peace in Palestine”, a high-level summit hosted by Emine Erdogan. The event brought together First Ladies and government officials from around the globe to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and call for a ceasefire.<sup>100</sup>

Cooperation on regional issues is also boosted by economic, political, and cultural bilateral relations. Following Türkiye-Qatar High Strategic Committee meeting held at the beginning of December in Doha, Ankara and Doha signed indeed 12 cooperation agreements on political consultations, cultural cooperation, bilateral labor cooperation, humanitarian aid, military, information and technology, science, industry, investment promotion, exports, among the others.<sup>101</sup>

#### **4.3.1. Sustainability of the normalization process and its implications**

The regional rift that put Saudi Arabia and UAE vs Türkiye and Qatar since of the latter's support of Political Islam in the post Arab uprisings<sup>102</sup> seem to be overcome. Although several reasons, including the outbreak of Covid19 and the war in Ukraine contributed to the shifts of the regional powers, Türkiye has been carrying out a policy of détente with both the UAE and Saudi Arabia with the end of the Gulf crisis in 2021. Besides ideological complementarities, indeed, Doha and Ankara have strengthened their relations over a variety of fields in the last decade. Since the establishment of the Qatari-Turkish Supreme Strategic Committee in 2014, nearly 100 documents were signed to optimize the cooperation level<sup>103</sup> and the partnership cemented by Türkiye's continued alignment with Qatar, -going so far as to station Turkish troops in the country- when Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt blockaded Qatar by air, land, and sea in 2017.<sup>104</sup>

The process of normalisation between Türkiye and the Gulf has kept on also with the outbreak of the war in Gaza. After a first phase of ‘soft condemnation’ linked to the *up to the war* path for normalizing relations with Tel Aviv, Türkiye has then adopted harsh positioning towards Israel, without criticising “UAE and Saudi Arabia’s relatively low-key diplomacy on the war”<sup>105</sup>.

Indeed, while Ankara and Tel Aviv have once again reached the lowest with the most recent arrests in Türkiye of 34 alleged Mossad agents as well as Ankara’s support to South Africa’s genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, the UAE have not questioned the Abram Accords albeit calling for avoiding escalations, rejecting displacement of Palestinians, and ending hostilities. As well, Saudi Arabia has not excluded the possibility to normalise

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<sup>100</sup>See <https://istanbul.consulate.qa/en/media/news/detail/1445/05/02/the-participation-of-her-highness-sheikha-moza-bint-nasser-in-istanbul-in-a-high-level-summit-entitled-united-for-peace-in-palestine->

<sup>101</sup> Z. F. Beyaz, *Türkiye, Qatar sign 12 agreements, issue joint declaration after high strategic committee meeting*, December 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-qatar-sign-12-agreements-issue-joint-declaration-after-high-strategic-committee-meeting/3073023>

<sup>102</sup> See Egypt and Libya sections.

<sup>103</sup> Qatar News Agency, *Qatar and Türkiye: Strategic Partnership, Mutual Support, Identical Political Visions*, December 2023. See <https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/Special-News/2023-12/04/0065-qatar-and-turkiye-strategic-partnership.-mutual-support.-identical-political-visions---report>

<sup>104</sup> The blockade was lifted in 2021 with the “Al-Ula Statement”.

<sup>105</sup> G. Dalay, *What does Turkey’s policy on the Gaza war mean for the region?*, Chatham House, December 2023. See <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/what-does-turkeys-policy-gaza-war-mean-region>

relations with Israel, while binding it to the creation of a Palestinian state.<sup>106</sup> Despite that, Erdoğan underlined that “unlike in previous crises, the Islamic world has stood more united and in solidarity”.<sup>107</sup> The presence of Erdoğan in both the Islamic cooperation council and the 44th Gulf Cooperation Summit, indicates Türkiye is “supporting and complementing roles of key Arab states, rather than competing with them”.<sup>108</sup>

This attitude relies on convenience grounds and suggests that the normalisation process circumvented the first potential obstacle.

On the one hand, despite the strong frictions with Tel Aviv, Türkiye still have the possibility of playing a role in de-escalating the conflict and serving as a guarantor power<sup>109</sup> in the aftermath of the war, also since its special economic, security and ideological links with Doha. Qatar, that already played as regional broker in US-Taliban and US-Iran negotiations,<sup>110</sup> has now the most prominent role in mediating in Gaza, thanks to its leverage on Hamas. A position that Türkiye could complement. However, to realise Ankara’s ambitious role of stabilizing power, cooperation with the other *once-at-odds* Gulf countries will be vital as well. This would also facilitate Türkiye’s credit as *stabilizing* regional power at the eyes of the Western countries, despite Ankara’s current vocal condemnation of Israel. To be noted that Blinken’s early January visit to Türkiye included discussions on ‘*the role that Turkey can play, both in the day after for Gaza, in terms of the challenging questions of Palestinian-led governance, security, rebuilding, as well as the work that it can do to try to produce more lasting durable peace and security in the region*’.<sup>111</sup>

In addition, Türkiye has all its interests in maintaining warm relations with the Gulf due to its financial necessity that matches with GCC *know-how* demand. Indeed, Ankara is facing dramatic currency crisis and cash support from the Gulf is an incentive to keep the normalisation process on track. The GCC’s extensive foreign reserves offer a solid ground for partnership. Since 2022, Qatar invested the most to Türkiye contributing with \$9.9 billion, with a \$5 billion bilateral trade target set in December 2023.<sup>112</sup> The UAE comes in second with \$3.4 billion, and Saudi Arabia is third with \$500 million.<sup>113</sup> According to quote by Turkish Trade Minister Ömer Bolat, bilateral trade between the UAE and Türkiye is set to jump by 50 percent to hit \$15 billion by the end of the year following the signing of the comprehensive economic cooperation agreement (Cepa) in September.<sup>114</sup> On the other hand, Gulf countries, which are carrying out their programmatic

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<sup>106</sup> D. Guldogan, *Saudi Arabia interested in normalization with Israel after Gaza war: Envoy*, Anadolu Agency, January 2024. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-arabia-interested-in-normalization-with-israel-after-gaza-war-envoy/3104593>

<sup>107</sup> See <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-intensifies-diplomatic-contacts-for-gaza>

<sup>108</sup> G. Dalay, *What does Turkey’s policy on the Gaza war mean for the region?*, Chatham House, December 2023. See <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/what-does-turkeys-policy-gaza-war-mean-region>

<sup>109</sup> M. Bryza, *Can Turkey help resolve the Israel-Hamas war?*, Atlantic Council, January 2024. See <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/can-turkey-help-resolve-the-israel-hamas-war/>

<sup>110</sup> S. Çevik, *Erdogan, Gaza, and Turkey’s Regional Reconciliation*, Arab Center Washington DC, November 2023. See <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/erdogan-gaza-and-turkeys-regional-reconciliation/>

<sup>111</sup> Al Jazeera, *US diplomat Blinken meets Turkey’s Erdogan, kicking off Gaza diplomacy tour*, January 2024. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/6/us-diplomat-blinken-meets-turkeys-erdogan-kicking-off-gaza-diplomacy-tour>

<sup>112</sup> P. Kumar, *Turkey and Qatar aim to double trade to \$5bn*, Arabian Gulf Business Insight, December 2023. See <https://www.agbi.com/articles/turkey-and-qatar-aim-to-double-trade-to-5bn/>

<sup>113</sup> See <https://gcc-turkiye.net/>

<sup>114</sup> P. Kumar, *UAE-Turkey trade set for 50% rise to \$15bn in 2023*, Arabian Gulf Business Insight, November 2023. See <https://www.agbi.com/articles/uae-turkey-trade-set-for-50-rise-to-15bn-in-2023/>

*Visions*,<sup>115</sup> see Türkiye as a hub for investment but also a major partner for economic diversification and cooperation in the sectors of entertainment, tourism, education, construction, defence, energy, both at the regional level and abroad. Turkish firms have indeed long penetrated Gulf markets and contributed to megaprojects (airports, highways, and stadiums). During the first half of 2023 was also reported that a group of executives representing roughly 80 Turkish building companies met with Saudi Aramco in Ankara for discussions about \$50bn of potential projects to be realized in the Saudi Arabia<sup>116</sup> and at the end of October Turkish finance minister Mehmet Şimşek paid visits to Gulf countries to introduce investments opportunities. In addition, Türkiye's increasing prominence in defence industry production materialises in cooperation over technology transfer, training programs and arms sales to the GCC, as happened with the Turkish made Bayraktar drones. In 2018, Doha signed a contract with Turkey that requested TB2s, ground control station systems, and a training simulator.<sup>117</sup> Then in 2022 the UAE made a significant purchase drones from Türkiye and in July 2023, during the International Defense Industries Fair (IDEF) in Istanbul, Türkiye and the UAE signed a defense cooperation agreement between the Defense and Aviation Group (OSSA) and the Black Cobra Military Equipment Company (BCMS) in Abu Dhabi.<sup>118</sup> In the same month, during Erdogan's visit to Saudi Arabia, agreements were signed by the defense ministry and the Turkish company Baykar to localize the production of drones and their systems within the Kingdom, ensuring technology transfer and joint production.<sup>119</sup> So thus, defense cooperation between Türkiye and GCC has been strengthened over the last years, also thanks to GCC's aspiration to build an indigenous defense industry, and due to their willingness to lower their dependence from the Western military equipment, also considering that Türkiye's products are more competitive in terms of prices.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, Türkiye could also serve as a hub between Europe and the Gulf region, thanks to its geographical location. The Development Road project is set to support this potential by connecting Türkiye to the Persian Gulf via a road and rail network<sup>121</sup> throughout Iraq. The DPR, with an estimated cost of \$17 billion, is scheduled to be completed in its first phase by 2028 and it aims at facilitating the diversification of energy markets, providing European countries with more alternatives.<sup>122</sup> If completed, together with the improvement of trade and infrastructures

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<sup>115</sup> With "Saudi Vision 2030", Saudi Arabia aims at strengthening its status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds; becoming a global investment powerhouse; a global hub connecting three continents, Asia, Europe, and Africa. Also, the UAE, with "We the UAE 2031", aim at continuing their development path for the next 10 years, with focus on social, economic, investment and development aspects.

<sup>116</sup> E. Miliken, G. Cafiero, *What does Erdogan's re-election mean for Turkey-Gulf relations?*, Al Jazeera, June 2023. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/6/what-does-erdogans-re-election-mean-for-turkey-gulf-relations>

<sup>117</sup> A. Bakir, *Turkey's defense industry is on the rise. The GCC is one of its top buyers*, Al Jazeera, August 2023. See <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/turkey-defense-baykar-gcc-gulf/>

<sup>118</sup> M. Celik, *UAE open to new defense agreements with Türkiye: Envoy*, Daily Sabah, September 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/uae-open-to-new-defense-agreements-with-turkiye-envoy>

<sup>119</sup> K. Hamadeh, *Turkey asserts its place in the GCC's new multipolar security structure*, Al Majalla, July 2023. See <https://en.majalla.com/node/296371/politics/turkey-asserts-its-place-gccs-new-multipolar-security-structure>

<sup>120</sup> A. Bakir. Op. cit.

<sup>121</sup> S. Tomac, *Turkish contractors steer route to Development Road Project*, Anadol Agency, December 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-contractors-steer-route-to-development-road-project/3089621>; M. Heyes, *Turkey and Iraq unveil plans for US\$17 billion Development Road project*, Construction briefing, January 2024. See <https://www.constructionbriefing.com/news/turkey-and-iraq-unveil-plans-for-us-17-billion-development-road-project/8034131.article>

<sup>122</sup> B. Elmani, *OPINION - Türkiye's 'Development Road' and geopolitics of interconnectedness*, Anadol Agency, October 2023. See <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-turkiyes-development-road-and-geopolitics-of-interconnectedness/3005929>

between Iraq and Türkiye, it could also represent a key opportunity for facilitating trade<sup>123</sup> and logistics between GCC and Türkiye. However, issues still arise on both the feasibility and sustainability of the project, mainly due to the evolution of Türkiye's operations in Northern Iraq and to the potential competition with Iran's port in the Persian Gulf.<sup>124</sup>

Thus, together with a renewed cooperation in the regional arena, Türkiye's FDI's needs and GCC's diversification efforts seemingly translate into a *win-win* rapprochement process led by economic and security pragmatism. Not to be excluded also, the fact that the normalisation between Türkiye and the Gulf countries could have positive repercussion on Türkiye's positioning into the Eastern Mediterranean, contributing to open spaces for Ankara, also thanks to its renewed relations with Greece and Egypt.

At the current stage, risks for GCC- Türkiye normalisation are unlikely. However, uncertainties remain over the *spillover* effects of the Gaza war and their potential impacts on the Middle East chessboard. Indeed, despite the resumption of relations between Teheran and Riyadh after years of proxy competition in Yemen, it is to be seen whether the tensions at the Red Sea shores between Houthi rebels and USA/UK forces<sup>125</sup> will have consequences over the regional and international alliance reshape.

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<sup>123</sup> I. Aktas, *Türkiye-Iraq Development Road could be key for Iraq's stability*, Daily Sabah, October 2023. See <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/turkiye-iraq-development-road-could-be-key-for-iraqs-stability>

<sup>124</sup> B. Elmani op cit.

<sup>125</sup> See <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/1/12/us-and-uk-launch-air-strikes-against-yemens-houthis>

## 5. Caucasus

### 5.1 Armenia- Türkiye, meaningful bilateral developments

Numerous attempts have been made to normalize relations between Türkiye and Armenia. Following the favorable political circumstances that emerged after the 2nd Karabakh War, Türkiye and Armenia initiated direct dialogue without preconditions for the gradual normalization of relations. Special Representatives were appointed, and after several meetings, direct commercial flights between the two countries commenced on February 2, 2022. An agreement was reached to open the Türkiye-Armenia border to third-country citizens on July 1, 2022, and to initiate air cargo trade. In a broader context, Türkiye aims to continue the normalization process with Armenia, emphasizing the establishment of good neighborly relations without preconditions. The approach includes confidence-building measures, proceeding gradually, and considering regional developments. This stance reflects Türkiye's commitment to fostering stability and cooperation in the South Caucasus region. The positive developments post-2nd Karabakh War, including direct dialogue and practical agreements, signify a proactive diplomatic approach amid changing regional dynamics. Acknowledgment of nuanced perspectives in the aftermath of the 44-Day War demonstrates an understanding of the evolving regional landscape and the challenges and opportunities it presents.

#### 5.1.2 Sustainability of the normalisation process and its implications

Türkiye's emphasis on a gradual and confidence-building approach underscores a strategic commitment to long-term stability and regional cooperation.

Within the context of the issues outlined thus far, the primary problematic areas in Türkiye-Armenia relations can generally be categorized under three headings:

- (1) Armenians' claims to secure recognition of "genocide" allegations on the international stage.
- (2) The land border between Türkiye and Armenia remains closed.
- (3) The Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven surrounding provinces of Azerbaijan have been tangled up in an unresolved situation for over 30 years<sup>126</sup> and the Minsk Group's efforts have proven insufficient in resolving the issue.

Potential solutions to the aforementioned problem areas hold the promise of positive outcomes, including the resolution of issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the indirect normalization of Armenia-Türkiye relations. Türkiye's support to Azerbaijan continued before, during, and after the Karabakh Operation. Türkiye has consistently opposed what it considered an occupation of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region by Armenia, supporting a resolution within the framework of international law. The outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

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<sup>126</sup> TASAM (2023), "Türkiye - Ermenistan İlişkilerinde Sorun Ne?", <https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/3122/turkiye - ermenistan iliskilerinde sorun ne>

in late 2020 led to a significant victory for Azerbaijan, resulting in a tripartite ceasefire agreement on November 10. The subsequent demarcation saw Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic losing a substantial portion of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with ongoing ceasefire violations and tensions leading to a military operation launched by Azerbaijan in September 2023. Türkiye's stance post-conflict involves supporting the signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fostering good neighborly relations, and promoting infrastructure development, welfare enhancement, and regional connectivity in the Karabakh territory. Baku's strategic approach factors in the necessity of avoiding unnecessary antagonism with Russia, recognizing the potential complexities of NATO membership, and adopting a nuanced policy toward Russia in resolving the Karabakh problem. Hence, the challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in achieving a sustainable peace agreement with guarantees, necessitating a broader stable arrangement. However, the opening of the Türkiye-Armenia land border would establish a more direct connection and transportation route with the West, thereby positively impacting the Armenian economy. Moreover, the creation of new pipelines and railway lines, running parallel to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route and traversing Armenia, could facilitate the transfer of natural gas resources from the Caucasus and Central Asia to EU countries in need. Additionally, these alternative routes could offer flexibility in resource flow, mitigating the risk of disruptions in potential crisis situations. In light of the assessments thus far, the collaborative efforts of Türkiye and Italy have significant potential roles. Such cooperation could positively contribute to the overall integration of South Caucasus countries, especially Armenia, with the West. Developments in this direction also hold the potential to influence Armenia's diplomatic approaches to Russia and Iran.

## **5.2. Georgia – Türkiye, Meaningful bilateral developments**

Türkiye steadfastly supports Georgia's territorial integrity and rejects the purported independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Advocating for peaceful resolutions within the framework of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, Türkiye also backs Georgia's aspirations to integrate with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

A focal point in Türkiye-Georgia relations is the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to their homeland. Türkiye closely monitors this issue, emphasizing the removal of obstacles hindering the return of Ahıska Turks to Ahıska.

The prominence of economic collaboration underscores the practical and mutually beneficial aspects of the Türkiye-Georgia relationship. The establishment of mechanisms like the High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (YDSK) and participation in trilateral/quadrilateral meetings reflects a commitment to structured and sustained cooperation. Türkiye's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic aspirations showcases a strategic diplomatic approach to regional challenges.

Despite challenges posed by certain Turkish/Muslim elements in Georgia, Ankara and Tbilisi have successfully navigated these issues. The bond between Türkiye and Georgia is intensifying through political solidarity, economic collaboration, and joint efforts in transporting Caspian oil and natural gas, countering Russia's regional policies.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> TASAM (2023), “Türkiye-Gürcistan İlişkileri”, <https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/3123/turkiye-gurcistan-iliskileri>.

When evaluating Türkiye-Georgia relations, it becomes evident that most of the existing issues between the two nations, albeit limited, stem from the Turkish/Muslim minorities residing in Georgia with historical ties to Türkiye. The burgeoning commercial ties between Türkiye and Georgia, and notably the facilitation of Caspian oil and natural gas to the global market via Georgia through Türkiye, alongside collaborative efforts to counter Russia's influence in the region, significantly impact Ankara-Tbilisi relations. The alignment in Caucasus policies, particularly in response to Russia, serves as the foundation for political and security relations between Georgia and Türkiye. In this context, Türkiye and Georgia (1) collaborate on trade and energy transmission lines and (2) jointly address security concerns.<sup>128</sup>

The presence of Azeri Turks in Georgia, along with Turkish minorities from other tribes, directly influences public opinion in Türkiye, particularly concerning events in Georgia and the North Caucasus. Therefore, explaining the relations between Türkiye and Georgia solely on political, strategic, and economic grounds becomes challenging. In Türkiye, where governments are elected, the identities and inclinations of the electorate inevitably shape Ankara's foreign policy. The connection between Türkiye and Georgia is thus influenced not only by geopolitical considerations but also by the sociocultural ties stemming from the diverse ethnic composition within Georgia.<sup>129</sup>

Ankara believes that the most viable path for Abkhazia is to remain a robust autonomous region within Georgia, which is a much smaller and weaker state compared to Russia. This solution is seen as the best alternative for Western countries and the EU.

Türkiye holds a strategic position for Georgia, providing an avenue to break free from Russia's political and economic influence while creating new investment and trade opportunities. Türkiye stands as the second-largest investor in Georgia after the United States and is the second-largest trading partner after Russia.

The U.S. policy of isolating Iran and the Azeri-Armenian conflict stemming from the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute has positioned Georgia as the sole gateway to the Caucasus and Central Asia for Türkiye. Ankara, being the main transit route for Caspian oil, benefits from oil and natural gas pipelines, creating opportunities for job creation, refining, and exporting oil. Moreover, the revenues generated from oil and natural gas exports play a crucial role in revitalizing Türkiye's economy and increasing its foreign trade volume. The Caspian fossil fuel resources, particularly since 2010, have contributed significantly to meeting Türkiye's domestic energy demand. This strategic collaboration enhances economic ties between Türkiye and Georgia, reinforcing their mutual interests in the region.

The Kars-Tbilisi Railway and Rize-Poti Fiber Optic Cable Line projects represent long-standing collaborative efforts between Türkiye and Georgia. The Kars-Tbilisi Railway, in particular, is expected to significantly boost regional trade. Given the closed Türkiye-Armenia border, Georgia has become the primary route for Turkish shipments to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. For riparian countries with abundant oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea, a key challenge is the lack of direct access to international markets. The former Soviet Republics of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are seeking alternative routes to reduce their dependence on Russia and Iran. In response, Türkiye and Georgia provide these countries with a secure and

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<sup>128</sup> Selçuk ÇOLAKOĞLU (2004), "Türkiye-Gürcistan İlişkileri (Turkey-Georgia Relations)", *Stratejik Öngörü*, TASAM, Vol.6, No.2.

<sup>129</sup> Selçuk ÇOLAKOĞLU (2004), "Türkiye-Gürcistan İlişkileri (Turkey-Georgia Relations)", *Stratejik Öngörü*, TASAM, Vol.6, No.2.

viable alternative route, helping them diversify their trade routes and establish connections with international markets. The strategic infrastructure projects and partnerships between Türkiye and Georgia play a crucial role in facilitating these economic and trade endeavors for the Caspian riparian countries.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, a pioneering project in the realm of pipelines, has been completed and actively transports Azeri oil. This line has played a crucial role in preventing the reliance on the Baku-Novorossiysk line for Azerbaijan's early oil supply. Running in parallel, the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP), developed alongside the BTC, facilitates the global transportation of Azerbaijan's natural gas from the Shah Deniz field via Georgia and Türkiye.

In addition to energy and trade collaborations, Türkiye and Georgia maintain close military cooperation. The Georgian Military Academy, established by the Turkish Army in the early 2000s, witnessed the training of Georgian officers by their Turkish counterparts for an extended period. Turkish military training extended to include Georgian Special Forces and Commando Units, both in Türkiye and Georgia. Every year, a specific number of Georgian students continue their training at Military Schools, the Military Academy affiliated with the National Defense University, and the Partnership for Peace Training Center (PfP Training Center) in Türkiye.

Furthermore, the collaborative efforts of Türkiye, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are evident in the annual Eternity Computer-Aided Simulation Exercises, conducted in one of the countries within the scope of generic scenarios focused on the safety of pipelines. The most recent exercise, "Eternity-2023," took place in October 2023 at the Military Games Center of the Military Management Institute of the Azerbaijan National Defense University. These joint initiatives reflect the ongoing cooperation and coordination in military training and strategic planning among the three nations.

### **5.3. Azerbaijan-Türkiye, Meaningful bilateral developments**

The multidimensional and strategic nature of Türkiye's relations with Azerbaijan is evident in intensive mutual high-level visits, symbolizing a longstanding tradition of prioritizing such engagements following significant developments or changes in office.

Tripartite and quadrilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan and Türkiye-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Iran platforms, contribute significantly to regional stability, peace, and prosperity. Special attention is given to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic<sup>130</sup>, which holds a distinctive role in bilateral relations due to its unique land connection between Türkiye and Azerbaijan.

The close military cooperation between Türkiye and Azerbaijan extends beyond energy and trade collaborations. The Azerbaijan Military Academy, established by the Turkish Army in the late 1990s, has been a focal point for the training of Azerbaijani officers by their Turkish counterparts for an extended period. Turkish military training has also encompassed Azerbaijan Special Forces and Commando Units, conducted in both Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Annually, a designated number of Azerbaijani students continue their training at Military Schools, the

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<sup>130</sup> Nakhichevan is an autonomous republic of Azerbaijan which shares a border with Türkiye and the south east of Armenia. The designed Zengezur Corridor will link Azerbaijan and Nakhchevan from the very South of Armenia once a peace deal is achieved.

Military Academy affiliated with the National Defense University, and the Partnership for Peace Training Center (PfP Training Center) in Türkiye.

Moreover, collaborative efforts involving Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are demonstrated through the annual Eternity Computer-Aided Simulation Exercises, carried out in one of the countries with a focus on generic scenarios related to the safety of pipelines, as mentioned previously. The most recent exercise, "Eternity-2023," occurred in October 2023 at the Military Games Center of the Military Management Institute of the Azerbaijan National Defense University. These joint initiatives underscore the ongoing cooperation and coordination in military training and strategic planning among the three nations, reflecting a commitment to regional security and stability.

The relationship between Türkiye and Azerbaijan is characterized by a special bond, often articulated within the framework of the principle of "One nation, two states." This principle emphasizes a strong sense of kinship between the two nations. In international matters that concern either of the states, Türkiye and Azerbaijan tend to prefer acting together, and this approach is evident in various domains, spanning from energy and trade routes to security and media issues.

This close relationship was particularly visible in the Nagorno-Karabakh operation conducted by Azerbaijan. Türkiye not only provided pre-operation training but also supplied significant material support, including weapons, vehicles, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), to the Azerbaijani army. The collaboration displayed the depth of cooperation and coordination between the two countries.

Given the strong public support for this joint approach, it is anticipated that bilateral cooperation will continue to strengthen, reflecting the shared commitment of Türkiye and Azerbaijan in addressing regional challenges and advancing their common interests. The "One nation, two states" principle remains a guiding force in shaping the special relationship between these two nations.

Türkiye and Azerbaijan share membership in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), formerly known as the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council)<sup>131</sup>. The organization, as of 2022, comprises Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Türkiye, with observer status held by Hungary, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and Turkmenistan. The OTS serves as an international cooperation platform for Turkish-speaking states. During the Extraordinary Leaders' Summit held by the OTS on March 16, 2023, several significant agreements were reached:

- (1) The Turkish Investment Fund Founding Agreement was signed, aiming to provide support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), development projects, transportation and logistics chains, infrastructure projects, investments in agriculture and tourism, and renewable energy studies,
- (2) Discussions focused on enhancing the human, administrative, and financial structure of the organization's secretariat,
- (3) Participants explored extensive cooperation opportunities spanning from the Adriatic to Asia.

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<sup>131</sup> Ahmet Keser, İbrahim Çütcü & Mehmet Vahit Eren (2022) Does country-level governance matter for national development? An analysis on the founding states of Turkic council, *Applied Economics*, 54:5, 522-535, DOI: 10.1080/00036846.2021.1966373

The organization serves as a platform for both Türkiye and Azerbaijan to strengthen relations with other member states. In a recent meeting, strategic agreements were made on the establishment of common media and broadcasting organs, collaborative initiatives on Turkish Language and Culture, and the creation of a common investment fund. The decision was made to initially establish a fund of \$500 million to facilitate joint investments in various sectors. This signifies the commitment of member states to deepen their cooperation across economic, cultural, and strategic dimensions within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States.

As a natural consequence of the reasons stated above, Türkiye's support to Azerbaijan continued before, during, and after the Karabakh Operation. Türkiye has consistently opposed Armenia presence in Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region, supporting a resolution within the framework of international law. The outcome of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in late 2020 led to a significant victory for Azerbaijan, resulting in a tripartite ceasefire agreement on November 10. The subsequent demarcation saw Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic losing a substantial portion of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, with ongoing ceasefire violations and tensions leading to a military operation launched by Azerbaijan in September 2023.

Türkiye's stance post-conflict involves supporting the signing of a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, fostering good neighborly relations, and promoting infrastructure development, welfare enhancement, and regional connectivity in the Karabakh territory. Baku's strategic approach factors in the necessity of avoiding unnecessary antagonism with Russia, recognizing the potential complexities of NATO membership, and adopting a nuanced policy toward Russia in resolving the Karabakh problem.

The challenge for Armenia and Azerbaijan lies in achieving a sustainable peace agreement with guarantees, necessitating a broader stable arrangement.

The main features of the relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan can be evaluated as follows:

Special attention to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic underscores its unique role as the sole land connection between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, emphasizing its strategic importance in regional dynamics. The aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and Azerbaijan's subsequent investments in demining infrastructure, and economic development signal a commitment for both Türkiye and Italy opportunities to serve in post-conflict reconstruction.

Recently a Forum was organized in December 2023 between the two countries' representatives. Minister of Commerce Ömer Bolat (TUR), Head of the Presidential Finance Office Göksel Aşan (TUR), Chief Public Auditor Şeref Malkoç (TUR), and many business people from Turkey attended the forum organized in cooperation with the Azerbaijan Export and Investment Promotion Agency (AZPROMO) and Türkiye-Azerbaijan Businessmen and Industrialists Association (TÜİB). Büyükfırat (Head of TÜİB), reminding that Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and İlham Aliyev set an annual trade volume target of 15 billion dollars, said, "This year, the trade volume (between Turkey and Azerbaijan) exceeded 7 billion dollars. It was an important meeting that will take us to this goal." "We will establish a tracking system for the work we have done in line with this goal shared his knowledge<sup>132</sup>.

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<sup>132</sup> Aksam.org. (2023). [Türkiye ve Azerbaycan'dan kritik hamle: Türk dünyasını birleştiren bir sürece giriyoruz \(aksam.com.tr\)](https://www.aksam.com.tr)